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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000703

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PI, NEA/PPD, NSC FOR RAMCHAND,
LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [KMPI](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: INFORMATION MINISTER REPORTS
MOVEMENT ON PRESS LAW AND CONSTITUENCY REFORM

REF: A. 05 KUWAIT 5306
[1](#)B. 05 KUWAIT 5083
[1](#)C. 05 KUWAIT 4314
[1](#)D. 05 KUWAIT 4293

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a March 1, 2006 meeting with the Ambassador, the newly re-appointed Minister of Information commented optimistically about progress made on the draft press law and reduction in the number of political constituencies in Kuwait, two key Freedom Agenda elements. The Minister expressed pride in the performance of the Kuwaiti government during the recent succession crisis and enthusiasm for the speed with which the draft press law was being addressed by the Kuwaiti parliament. He was more guarded about prospects for reduction in the number of electoral districts. End summary.

Enthusiastic Support for Reform

[1](#)2. (C) Having received a strong vote of confidence exemplified by the retention of his position during the recent shuffling of the Kuwaiti cabinet, Anas Mohammed Al-Rashed greeted the Ambassador on March 1 with a general sense of optimism and enthusiasm. During their discussion of the status of political reforms in Kuwait, the Minister remarked positively with respect to what he viewed as the parliament's speedy review of the draft press law. The former university professor said that the press law would be tabled for a final discussion and a possible vote in parliament on Monday, March 6. He anticipated that the law would be finalized soon, once the remaining five of twenty-eight amendments have been addressed, and then following a review period of two additional weeks. He opined that his re-appointment was an indicator of the Shaykh Sabah's support for the revised press law, since this had been the centerpiece of his agenda as Minister of Information prior to his re-appointment.

A Vote of Confidence During Crisis

[1](#)3. (C) Al-Rashed spoke in an upbeat manner about the way in which the succession issue had been handled in Kuwait. He commented on the delicate position he had been put in as Ministry of Information, with partisans among the Al-Sabah's calling him with "suggestions" on the kinds of programming that would be helpful to their particular vision of the succession line-up. He was also pleased that the TV stations the Ministry of Information controls went beyond the norm in cases of an Arab leader's passing -- "I'm proud of our performance during the succession crisis. Normally, when a king or leader passes in this region, it's Quran all the way.

We let people talk about the late Amir and hold programs. Some were unhappy, but this was a success." (Comment: This comment by the Minister seemed to reveal a bit of reflexive defensiveness, since Kuwait TV was criticized for its anodyne programming during the succession events. Most Kuwaitis turned to Al-Arabiya and Jazeera for both the hard news and the rumors about what was going on in their leadership circles.)

An Active Government - Essential to Democracy

14. (SBU) The Minister added that he believed the country was strengthened by its handling of the challenges succession raised to its constitution and parliament. He claimed that there was satisfaction with the performance of the new government and the active role that the Amir and the Crown Prince have taken, even attributing the recent shift in the timing of the parliament's consideration of reduction of the number of electoral constituencies to independent intervention on the part of the Prime Minister, Shaykh Nasser. He lauded this tackling of a hotly disputed topic on the part of the government as a move that was "good for democracy and good for Kuwait." The Minister gave the initiative a 60 percent chance of passing. In response to the Ambassador's comment that the Government would need to exercise determined leadership to get this proposal passed, Al-Rashed agreed and stated that the government "cannot run with everyone applauding. You have to choose the right road." Regarding the need for reduction of constituencies, he mentioned that detractors were those who were elected under the status quo and, therefore, resist new directions, but now that women have achieved the right to vote, changing the system was critical to the achievement of their full and

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successful political participation.

Holding Back the Hardliners

15. (C) Referring to Iraq and Iran, Al-Rashed stated that Kuwait must continually improve in the areas of democracy and reform due to the demands it faced from its neighbors. He reiterated a concern often expressed by many Kuwaitis, that as a parent and a human being he was worried about the future and relations with Iran. "This issue needs to be dealt with quietly," he commented adding, "as Shaykh Sabah told President Bush last year, give it time and use dialogue." With respect to the Iraq, he said that the Kuwaiti Minister of the Awqaf and Religious Affairs had roundly condemned the destruction of the Shi'a mosque in Iraq and has pressed for openness to Shi'a and Christian populations in Kuwait. He characterized the minister as "balanced" despite facing strong opposition from Kuwaiti hardliners and stressed the need for more school programs that instilled moderate views and progressive approaches in the youth.

MEPI, Media Projects, and Al-Manar

16. (C) Speaking of programs, the Ambassador and Minister discussed a number of other topics, including a proposal by IBB to swap radio frequencies with the GOK, regional MEPI projects targeting the independent media, Kuwait's candidates for the Edward R. Murrow IVLP, and the fact that Al Manar TV channel is on the verge of being designated a terrorist organization. Al-Rashed thanked the Ambassador for the continued support of the USG through its diverse programs and suggested that Public Affairs work closely with the Ministry's Foreign Department to develop additional opportunities for exchange, citing past projects with American students. He mentioned that he planned to introduce a new law for the regulation of television and radio and sought the Embassy's support in identifying an expert or specialist to assist the Ministry of Information with this

project.

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